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ABSTRACT

Described in this paper is a writing strategy used in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes for Spanish-speaking adult immigrants in a Washington, D.C. center that goes beyond the standard ESL textbook reading/writing exercises to involve students in the writing process. The teacher wrote a brief text in the first person on a topic of interest to immigrants--homesickness--to be read aloud in class and discussed. The students were then asked to write about three living places and situations, one in the past, one in the present, and one in the future. Student responses were often animated and contained surprising vocabulary items. Other narratives based on the same principles were developed for more advanced classes. The technique was also found to be useful for group composition, in which the students draft a story as a group, allowing the weaker students to actively participate in the discussion. The short story format, group interaction, and open-ended narrative style make the writing process both beneficial and challenging to students still struggling with the language. (MSE)

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Barbara Jean Hall
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An Integrative Approach to Writing

For Adult ESL Beginners

My topic today concerns a particular writing strategy that I have developed and implemented at the Spanish Education Development Center (SED Center) in Washington, D.C., where I teach ESL classes to adult immigrants. The ESL students who come to the SED Center for classes are primarily low-income and educationally disadvantaged immigrants whose English needs are, for the most part, "survival" in the sense that they need basic communicative skills to function in the community where they live and work. Because most students are not from a print-oriented society like the U.S., reading and writing development has taken a back seat to the first order skills of listening and speaking. However, as of recently, students have expressed particular concern and desire for improving their writing in English.

This surge of interest in writing by ESL students has generated much thought at the SED Center, where teachers are struggling to go beyond sentence completion and form-filling activities, the standard "writing" exercises of competency-based texts. The majority of ESL low-level textbooks (such as Survival English by Mosteller and Paul, English for Adult Competency by Keltner, Howard, and Lee, and A Conversation Book) lack readings of more than one paragraph and lack writing exercises that are more than one sentence. Many of us are familiar with this kind of reading/writing exercise that culminates a given unit. (see samples in Appendix)

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What is particularly bothersome about this kind of reading/writing activity is that it offers no way to engage the student in the writing process. The one paragraph model, though it places new vocabulary within a simple syntactic structure, only requires that the student repeat exact sentences from the above passage. It offers little in terms of creativity, inventiveness, or involvement.

What appears, then, as necessary supplements to low-level competency-based textbooks are reading passages of a more substantial length and writing exercises that draw on students' experiences, knowledge, or critical opinions.

I first experimented with this notion with a Level One ESL class at the SED Center, using a short narrative called "Jaime's Story" that I had modeled after many that I had read in Laurie Kuntz's book The New Arrival.

Jaime's Story

> Now I live in the United States. I'm living with my family in a small apartment. There are four rooms in our apartment. There's one bedroom, one bathroom, one kitchen, and a small living room. My wife Teresa and my two children, Ramon and Maria, live there with me.
>
> We live in Washington, D.C. It's a big city. It's bigger than Lima, Peru where I'm from. There's a lot of traffic here in Washington. And it's a noisy city too. I get lost all the time.
>
> Sometimes I miss the mountains of Peru and the nice beaches. I miss my family in Peru too. My father and my mother still live in Peru and when I think of them, I get homesick.
>
> When I feel homesick, I go to the park on 16th Street. I like the trees and flowers there. The park is my favorite place because it makes me think of my country.

When writing "Jaime's Story," I used the vocabulary and set phrases established in our previous lessons on "Housing" and included some details of the common occurrence (at least, to our students) of a move from Central or South America to inner city Washington. After each member of the class had the opportunity to read a segment of the story aloud, we isolated difficult vocabulary terms and discussed the details of the story. Many

students asked about the meaning of "homesick," and then, after understanding, began to relate similar feelings.

Following thirty minutes of this reading and discussion, we broke into four groups of five, and the students were handed the "Writing Practice" activity. The "Writing Practice" asked the students to write about three different living places and situations -- "people you live with now" (the present); "your house in your country" (the past); and "a house you would like to live in" (the future). Volunteers, one per group, assisted the students in finding words, in spelling words, or sometimes in explaining the directions.

What was most encouraging, and absolutely delightful, were the outcomes of this exercise. Here's a sample of what I discovered:

First, from Jose Nicholas, probably the most inhibited and linguistically undeveloped student in the class (a "raw" beginner as they say), I received a most unexpected response to "a house you would like to live in:"

Jose's response:

"I like

one car

one TV

one refridgerator

two maid."

From Martha, who represents the kind of "average" ESL students in Level One, I read the following:

> "I would like a house with my husband and my daughter, what have one pool, one tennis court, barbeque pit, big yard, the new car this year, and furniture beautiful."

And from Jose Olivia, probably the most advanced student in the class that session, I received the following paragraph:

> "I would like a house with a big living room, with big windows too, in front of big gardens and pool, for swim all day for the morning, and in the living room I would like especial stereo sistem for earing nice music in my rest time, maybe one car from my children goes to the beach some weekend and for carry they to the school and for too go shopping with my wife all week." Very truly yours, Jose Olivia.

Most enlightening to me was the use of many vocabulary items, such as "maid, barbeque pit, pool, stereo sistem," that we had not covered specifically in the class. The writing exercise, it seemed, had prompted a context for using words from their vocabulary storehouses. After completing the writing, students read their responses to members of their small group, and in this way, students were able to teach each other the particular lexical items they knew.

From this initial exercise one year ago, I immediately discovered a multiplicity of advantages. First, students were actively engaged in the process. Reading and writing had something to do with them. Secondly, in the composing process, students could draw on familiar words and structures. Thirdly, students could share information about themselves to other members of their group in a relaxed and non-threatening way. And from the teacher's vantage point, the exercise provided a necessary recycling of vocabulary and language structures from the week's unit.

Encouraged by the results from my Level One class, I began to develop similar narratives, such as "Jose's Predicament" and "Young-Chul's Story," for my Level Three and Four classes. One technique I found particularly stimulating was the use of an open-ended passage to serve as the starting point for discussion and to generate ideas for completing the story in written form. The approach followed much of the same process as the initial exercise. I would start with a reading of the passage, stopping to discuss and define troublesome words or expressions. Then after asking several comprehension

questions to assure basic understanding of the problem, I would break the class into small groups, paying attention to grouping heterogeneously with a facilitator per group, if available. Next, we'd discuss the problem posed and possible solutions, being careful not to come to any group consensus. After fifteen to twenty minutes of discussion, I would have students write down their versions of the ending. Then I'd ask students to read their endings, and open the floor to questions from student to student. During this ninety-minute lesson, thus, we would see the movement from Reading to Listening/Speaking to Writing, and then back to Reading/Reciting and Listening/Speaking. By integrating these skills into a single activity, vocabulary and new language structures are recycled and reinforced, thereby emphasizing the connection between the four modes of language.

Not without exception can we use this integrative writing approach with yet another technique: the group composition process. This method I have found extremely useful when teaching a mixed group of low-level beginners that range from semi-literate to literate in their native languages. In implementing the group composition process, I have the small group choose a scribe to record the group's ideas and to work with all members in drafting an ending for the story. Usually someone volunteers for this task. Here, in this approach, the members of the group must work at consensus and decide which of the several endings that group members suggest is the most appropriate and the most acceptable. One benefit here is that the weaker students in writing do not stand out because of their limited abilities but may serve as active and vocal members in the group-consensus process. After each group decides and drafts its conclusion, a spokesperson presents the ending to the rest of the class. At this point, the class often breaks into lively and

sometimes rather heated debate. Most often, the class time is up before discussion has ended.

From my first attempts at an integrated approach to its more sophisticated developments, I have found this process both beneficial and challenging to student groups that are still struggling with the code. It goes without saying that writing does not occur in a vacuum, and the short story format lends itself to generating content for writing. In addition, group interaction seems to lower students' affective filters, providing them a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere for brainstorming. And finally, the openendedness of the narratives encourages students to be critical, be creative, and be expressive in solving a particular problem. Most of all, though, the rewards come back to the ESL teacher who shares the writing process as discovery with her students.

Writing Practice

Vocabulary:

bedroom, bathroom, living room
dining room, kitchen, patio,
porch, yard, garden, neighborhood,
window, door, sink, stove, dishwasher

Verbs:

have, has
live
rent
share

I. Tell me about the people you live with now.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

II. Tell me about your house in your country.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

III. Tell me about a house you would like to live in.

_____

_____

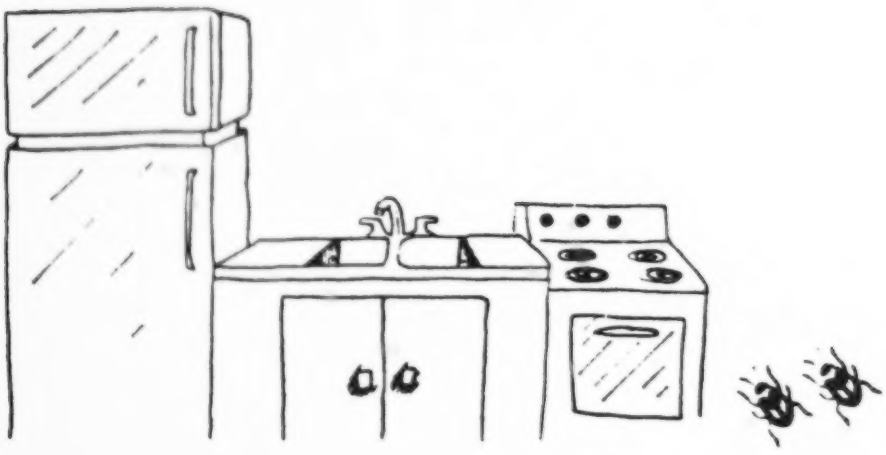
_____

_____

_____

_____

Ann has a problem. She has cockroaches in her kitchen. She has cockroaches in her bathroom, too. She needs to spray.



1. Who has a problem?

_____

2. What's the problem?

_____

3. Does Ann have cockroaches?

_____

4. Where are the cockroaches?

_____

5. Does she need to spray?

_____

6. Does she have cockroaches in the living room or the kitchen?

_____

From Survival English, by Lee Mosteller and Bobbi Paul (Prentice-Hall)

Sue and Kim have a new house. It's unfurnished. It has 2 bedrooms and 1 bathroom. Sue and Kim have a sofa, a bed, and a table. They want to buy a refrigerator.

1. Do Sue and Kim have a new house?

_____

2. Is it furnished or unfurnished?

_____

3. Does it have 2 or 3 bedrooms?

_____

4. Do Sue and Kim have a sofa?

_____

5. Do Sue and Kim have a bed?

_____

6. Do Sue and Kim have a refrigerator?

_____

7. Do Sue and Kim want to buy a bed?

_____

8. Do Sue and Kim want to buy a table?

_____

From Survival English, by Lee Hosteller and Bobbi Paul (Prentice-Hall)

PROBLEM-POSING

JOSE'S PREDICAMENT

I live with a Salvadorian family. There are eight people living in a two-bedroom apartment in Mount Pleasant in Washington, D.C. It's very crowded. I sleep in the small bedroom with three other men. I would like to move out and rent a small apartment, but I don't want to live alone.

Rents are very expensive in Washington. There are many apartments and houses for rent advertised in the Washington Post. They're all very expensive. For example, I saw an advertisement for a one-bedroom apartment in the basement for $875.00. I cannot afford that! I work in a restaraunt, El Faro, as a waiter and only earn money in tips. The owner does not pay me minimum wage because he says the tips are very good. Sometimes I make $125.00 a week for seven nights of work. When I work in the daytime, I do not make as much money.

Name _____

Name _____ Reading and Writing

Directions: Read the story carefully. This is the beginning of the story. How would you finish it? Discuss this with your group. Then finish the story yourself. What did Young-Chul decide to do? Tell why. Also tell what happened to him.

Young-Chul's Story

Young-Chul came from a small country in Asia named Laos that was in between Vietnam and Thailand. In his country he worked as a laborer in the rice fields. Young-Chul used to get up every morning at 5:00 am, and go outside to feed the chickens and his pet dog Raul. Then with his father, he would walk three miles to the fields of his uncle Suprachart and work until 11:00 am. When the sun rose to midday, the bell would ring and the women from the house would bring out the lunch for the hard-working men. Then men used to sit on small stools in the fields, so they could eat without sitting in the water. They used to eat rice everyday. In Laos there are 13 different words for rice.

Young-Chul came to Washington, DC six months ago to live with his mother. They live in a small, basement apartment that has 2 rooms. Young-Chul gets up each morning at 5:00 am and walks five blocks to catch the bus to Silver Springs, Maryland. He has a job as a laborer working for a construction company. He goes to work at 7:00 am and has lunch at 12:30. He must bring his lunch to work and many times he forgets. In his job, Young-Chul digs earth from the ground and fills up a wheelbarrow. The work is very hard, and he gets very tired. His boss does not speak any Laotian, and Young-Chul does not know very much English.

Young-Chul has a chance to return to Laos with his mother, but he also can stay in Washington and live with his married brother Jin.

SED Center/Hall

Roberta's Story

My name is Roberta Navidad and I am 28 years old, I came to the United States from Lima, Peru about five years ago. When I lived in Lima, I used to get up every morning at 6:30 AM and have bread and cheese and juice with my parents and my brother Miguel. In my country I worked as a secretary for an architect. I used to work from 9:00 to 1:00, and then my family would meet at our house for a hot lunch from 1:30 to 3:00. During these long lunches, every member of the family used to tell of any problems he was having at work or with other people. I remember those afternoons very well, After lunch, I would go back to work for three hours in the afternoon. In the evening sometimes my boyfriend Ricardo would come over to the house or maybe we would go to a movie.

My life in the United States is very different now, Our family lives in Silver Spring, Maryland and it is a very busy city, because it is so close to Washington, D.C., the capital. Now I get up every morning at 5:00 AM, so that I can leave the apartment by 6:00 to catch the bus to Dupont Circle. I work in a small restaurant named Trio's as a breakfast cook. Most of the time I just make eggs and sometimes pancakes. I am taking English classes at night, so that I can work as a waitress soon. When I go to class in the evening, sometimes I get very sleepy and can't pay attention. My family doesn't get to see each other much anymore, because we can't get together at lunch time. My brother Miguel is returning to Peru in the spring and I may go with him. I miss my boyfriend and my friends, but I am learning about another way of life here.